

Anna Hartford 

'To Save a Likeness': Berger on Drawing & Resemblance

The moment pen hovers above paper, the world divides. So recently just one form—a plum, say—it now splits into at least three. There is the plum as perceived by sight. There is the plum the mind anticipates: round, purple, of a certain size and density. And then there is the plum on the page; what the line itself can create and achieve.

When a mark is made, so too 'a microcosm'.¹ With each succeeding mark, new laws and dynamics are created: 'there is air, there is pressure and therefore there is bulk and weight'.² In these marks, in their relation: life itself. They generate emotion and personality; they evoke memories, imaginings, and hauntings; they can make 'a cheek turn, a thumb articulate with a wrist, a breast press against an arm'.³

These three worlds—of the eye, of the mind, and of the page—do not cohere. Sometimes they pride themselves on not cohering. Usually we take the world as we see it, and the world as we think we see it, to be interchangeable. But when you set out to draw something, you realise that they are actually in profound opposition. The mind is trying to discount the eye: it is working to make it clear to you that the plum is round and that it would fit in the palm of your hand, when actually, if you were to obey the eye alone, the plum is a triangle, and it is larger than the branches behind it.

Berger often presents drawing as discovery and exploration. The person drawing is a bird, a pilot, a sailor: navigating and negotiating vast and vacant expanses. They are a bat throwing sonar against the world; a water-diviner in communion with their stick. He also renders drawing as ruthless observation. 'I say ruthless because an artist's observation is not just a question of his using his eyes; it is the result of his honesty, of his fighting with himself to understand what he sees'.⁴ (In this sense, drawing can almost be a way of life. In an obituary, Geoff Dyer remarked that although Berger did not need a university education, 'he was reliant, to the end, on his art school discipline of drawing'. In other words, reliant on a mode of engagement, and of presence, that encompassed the practice of ruthless observation – the belief that 'if he looked long and hard enough at anything it would either

yield its secrets or, failing that, enable him to articulate why the withheld mystery constituted its essence'.)

The eye and the mind must battle, so too the eye and the page. At first, the page is subservient to the eye, wanting only to obey it as best it can. But when it has deviated enough — failed enough — it takes on its own non-negotiable autonomy. This is the inevitable 'point of crisis', where the demands of the page overtake, and it is now reality itself that must be subservient — that must bend and retreat in order to obey and make coherent the laws that have been established by the lines on the page.⁵

It is remarkable how many lies a drawing can accommodate. How many false moves. 'Drawing is a ceaseless process of correction. It proceeds by corrected errors'.⁶ Sometimes the line can correct itself, but other times it is the world that must give way. Soon enough it won't matter. The drawing will have its own life, and it won't have to bear the comparison with reality for long. Often this comparison is only the artist's to make, a private reckoning, and soon enough it's theirs to forget. The drawing long outlasts a fleeting moment in the world; the page long outlasts the eye.

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Portraits are the exception. For portraits confess their failure far more readily than other drawings. They are, for that reason, among the riskiest drawings to undertake. For there is the instant, undisguisable fact — so immediately apparent to every observer — of having failed to capture a likeness.

The success or failure of other sorts of drawing can be esoteric. For those of us who distrust our experiences of art — who suspect we must be guilty of some predictable philistinism in everything we respond to — or fail to respond to — it always seems to require someone more sophisticated to genuinely be the judge. But the success and failure of a portrait, in this central regard, is there for all to see — the verdict immediate and indisputable.

'I've never known what likeness consists of in a portrait'. Berger writes. 'One can see whether it's there or not, but it remains a mystery'.⁷ A drawing can be relatively faithful to a person's features and the relationship between them, and yet it can remain stubbornly uninhabited. Conversely, it can be utterly unfaithful to those geometries — filled with detours and exaggerations — and yet a vibrant likeness can still arise.

It is as fickle as beauty itself, or indeed as ugliness. Sometimes it is all concentrated in one small place. 'Her left eye sometimes wanders,

to become a fraction displaced. At that moment this slight asymmetry was the most precious thing I could see. If I could only touch it, place it, with my stub of charcoal without giving it a name'.⁸

One evening Berger set out to draw a friend of his, Bogena. 'Not for the first time. I always fail because her face is very mobile and I can't forget her beauty. And to draw well, you have to forget that'.⁹ Bogena is Polish, and they are spending the Russian New Year together; she has brought sausages and wine.

Drawings may emerge from life, or from imagination, or from memory, or a combination of all three. It is only once Bogena has left for the night, and Berger is alone, that he is able to summon her likeness. The realm before him — Bogena herself — had only taken him away from her. This portrait required a collaboration, above all, between the mind and the page (by what he knew Bogena to be, rather than the Bogena before him). 'Her likeness now was in my head—and all I had to do was to draw it out, not look for it. The paper tore. I rubbed on paint sometimes as thick as ointment. Her face began to lend itself to, to smile at, its own representation. At four in the morning, it smiled back at me'.¹⁰

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The question of likeness and loss emerges with particular urgency in the essay 'Drawn to That Moment' (1976), in which Berger recounts his efforts to draw his father as he lies in his coffin. 'I was using my small skill to save a likeness, as a lifesaver uses his much greater skill as a swimmer to save a life'.¹¹ Here, especially vivid, is Berger's vision of drawing in defiance of disappearance. 'What you are drawing will never be seen again, by you or by anybody else. In the whole course of time past and time to come, this moment is unique: the last opportunity to draw what will never again be visible, which has occurred once and will never recur'.¹²

This is always true, of course, but it is usually easy to forget; it is easy to believe that you can hold onto what you see, or to believe that you can revisit it. But you do not make this mistake when you are looking upon the dead. Here, disappearance takes on a less subtle form, and drawing becomes an explicit act of resistance: to keep something of this image, this man. Not only a record of his face, as a photograph might, but also a record of his face being looked at for the last time, being searched; a record of a particular kind of attention. 'As I drew his mouth, his brows, his eyelids, as their specific forms emerged with lines from the whiteness of the paper, I felt the history and the experience which had made them as they were'.¹³

A few decades on, and the drawing would not be answerable. There would be no one to testify to the presence or absence of a likeness. It would not have the face, the man, the life (nor even necessarily their memory) to be compared to. It could then be appraised on different terms: 'a portrait of a man'. rather than a portrait of *this* man.

But these were not the terms that mattered in its execution. What mattered then, above any formal features, above the world of the page as it would remain, was the mystical project of capturing a person, a personality, using only the markings of a line upon a page. 'The drawing was no longer deserted but inhabited. For each form, between the pencil markers and the white paper they marked, there was now a door through which moments of a life could enter'.¹⁴

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If it is remarkable how many errors a drawing can accommodate; it is also remarkable how suddenly the accommodation can cease. 'It would of course be easy by some mistaken over-emphasis to burst the whole thing like a balloon; or it might collapse like too-thin clay upon a potter's wheel; or it might become irrevocably misshapen and lose its centre of gravity'.¹⁵

Resemblance is both durable and delicate. It can survive huge assaults, but one small touch can vanquish it. Since it is both, you can never tell how reckless you can be until it is too late.

This uncertainty is one kind of catastrophe in portraiture, another kind in our quests to intervene in our own appearances, when we can accidentally step over the line and cease to resemble ourselves. (Funny, too, how little understanding we have of our own likeness. In some respects, we have the least authority of anyone on the matter).

The question of our own resemblance, of who we might resemble, surely fascinates each of us. We gravitate to those celebrities with whom we've been compared or with whom we imagine there could be some comparison. It is their haircuts we coyly show our hairdressers. (My mother found this exchange — the tacit self-aggrandising comparison — so embarrassing that she once cut away Winona Ryder's face and presented her hairdresser with just a contextless pixie cut as a reference — a tiny crescent of glossy black paper).

Whenever conversation turns to these comparisons, I think of a female friend of mine who once gleefully told me that she had been likened to both Eva Green (the magnificent French Bond Girl) and also to Steve Buscemi. And amazingly it is so: both Eva and Steve reside within her face; you can see flickers of each of them, simultaneously,

in the dance of her expressions and mannerisms, although they have almost nothing in common with each other.

Berger's writing feels anathema to the world of either *Bond Girls* or Steve Buscemi (although he shared the planet with them both). Often it feels like he is writing from a different era altogether. As Bond is sipping Merlot, talking money with Eva Green, Berger is beneath a plum tree in Galicia, looking at drawings unwrapped from tissue paper and laid on the grass. 'The light has dimmed and the chickens have gone quiet. Marisa Camino comes out of the house to tell me that supper is ready'.¹⁶ While Steve Buscemi is in a bowling alley in Los Angeles, Berger has come upon rock paintings of butterflies in the Chauvet cave. 'Anne, who is dying in Cambridge, comes to mind'.

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Sometimes you can feel a bit worn down by the reverence and seriousness of Berger's writing. That too much of the self is repressed by it. But mostly you just marvel that it exists; that it can still exist.

It is hard to imagine writing like this emerging in the world as it is now. We have come to think of ourselves in such shallow, trivial terms, that reading these essays, you feel an amazement that they could once have been published at all; that there was once such a reader. The world was surely better off when that was the case. And it is sad, in a way, to realise that oneself is not really that reader, anymore; knowing, too, that you would be better off if you were.

Still, there is a strange and not unwelcome feeling of having a part of yourself addressed for the first time in so long. Some aspect of your humanity that has been sealed off in a dark room. But you find, when someone calls out for it, that it can still answer. It is still there, despite it all, and with it this dignifying vision of what an ordinary human life can be: something of grace and wisdom and simplicity and integrity and self-respect. Something long forgotten. In the seriousness, which at first feels so ill fitting, you can almost begin to take yourself seriously; in the reverence, you can almost begin to respect yourself.

Moreover, to respect yourself for reasons and in ways that are not dependent on anything. Not on your pursuits or your commitments; not even on your beliefs or your views. That is to say: for reasons that are indifferent to all the things we currently take as mattering, as so patently and emphatically mattering, and against which your small concerns could never count. A pivot to the intrinsic, to innate value, in a world consumed by the extrinsic.

It was during World War Two that Berger enrolled at art school in London. 'Amongst the debris of bomb sites and between the sirens of the air raid warnings, I had a single idea: I wanted to draw naked women'.¹⁷ Outside he could hear the roar of RAF fighters crossing the night sky to intercept German bombers; while inside, staring from the page to the model and back: 'the ankle of the foot on which her weight was posed was vertically under the dimple of her neck—directly vertical'.¹⁸

Again, as in so many other moments in Berger's writing, there is the defiance of the individual human life — its meaning, or worth — over history, or ideology, or any system that should seek to subsume it. That this — the dimple — should be allowed to matter to someone. That even at a time when ostensibly nothing but war existed, the dimple should still have been vertical, directly vertical, above the weight of the foot.

This is Berger's paradox, and his miracle: to simultaneously be such a profoundly moral and political writer and yet to refuse, resolutely, to ever collapse even a single person into merely morally or politically useful categories. That the theories and systems and structures which may indeed be grand enough to explain everything, will nevertheless be inadequate to explain any one person.

The writing on drawing is in some respects a transcription of the human unconscious. A way of trying to capture, through ruthless observation, that which we ordinarily do without thought. It is not a portrait of the roiling, maligned human unconscious — with its fears and prejudices and perversions — but rather the human unconscious that is filled with ability and perfect wisdom. That is making, moment by moment, a series of extraordinary judgment calls (a bird, a pilot, a sailor, a water diviner). That is involved in something esoteric and elemental: a conversation with the universe ('a ferocious and inarticulated dialogue'¹⁹), but also a game ('something thrown and caught'²⁰). That has found a way — and sometimes even leisurely, joyfully, easily — to create or to capture a world.

Berger is speaking with his son, Yves, about drawing. Yves and Steve Buscemi more readily co-exist; Nick Cave plays in the background as they talk. He confesses that he is incapable of drawing freely; to casually fail the way that he would need to in order to be free. When children draw, Yves points out enviously, they are disinterested in the end result. But we are incapable of such disinterest. 'We can't forget how bad a result can be'.²¹

When we begin a drawing, even in privacy, we always half imagine the public life of what we create. And in this public life, alas: the extrinsic. The 'reception' of who we are, and what we create in the world,

and with it: shame, pride, humiliation, vanity. We are hampered by our hard-won recognition of how bad a result can be, and that we can be answerable for it. Or, just as obstructive: by our recognition of how good a result can be, and that we might be celebrated for it. In turn we spurn and forsake those drawings (the majority, inevitably) that fail. ('The first drawing, as is so often the case—bad, bad'²²). We discard and regret them.

But within these pages and passages, we are invited to consider things differently. In Berger's habitual, ever-generous evocation of the human sublime, even our bad drawings, the embarrassing ones, are rendered as voyages of profound ontological discovery. Seeing them thus, it is possible to dwell on the value of the undertaking itself, irrespective of the result, and to feel for a moment that the execution of even a failed drawing — a burst, collapsed, toppled endeavour — is something extraordinary, something to be celebrated.

Notes

- 1 John Berger, Extract from *A Painter of Our Time* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958). (Selection from Berger on Drawing, edited by Jim Savage (London: Occasional Press, 2007)).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 John Berger, 'Drawings by Watteau' (New Statesman, 1964).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 John Berger, 'Drawing' (New Statesman, 1953).
- 6 'Distance and Drawings: Four letters from a correspondence between James Elkins and John Berger' in *Berger on Drawing*, edited by Jim Savage (London: Occasional Press, 2007)).
- 7 John Berger, 'Young Woman With Hand to her Chin,' first published in *Photocopies* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 John Berger, 'La Polonoise,' first published in *Titan: Nymph and Shepherd* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 John Berger, 'Drawn to That Moment' (New Society magazine, 1976) (Collected in *The White Bird*).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 John Berger, 'The Basis of all Painting and Sculpture is Drawing' (New Stateman Magazine, 1960).
- 16 John Berger, 'Sheets of Paper Laid on Grass,' first published in *Photocopies* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).
- 17 John Berger, 'To Take Paper, To Draw' (Harper's Magazine, 1987).
- 18 Ibid.

- 19 John Berger, ‘A Professional Secret’ (New Society magazine, 1987).
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 ‘Lobster and Three Fishes: A Dialogue Between John and Yves Berger,’ in *Berger on Drawing*, edited by Jim Savage (London: Occasional Press, 2007).
- 22 Ibid.

Notes on contributors

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